EMPLOYEE PREFERENCE FOR WORK ENVIRONMENT – A WORK FROM HOME PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Employers have always been striving to provide an optimum work environment to their employees which would contribute to maximum productivity, efficiency and revenue generation. Office space and work environment have expenditure associated with them and hence appropriate space utilization can contribute to reduction in capital expenditure. Work from home was one such cost saving method adopted post the Global financial crisis 2007-08. During the COVID-19 pandemic induced financial crisis, work from home has become a path followed by many companies worldwide as a part of their business continuity planning. Working from home has evidently resulted in short term cost saving for many companies especially small-scale companies, middle scale companies and startups. However, the long-term effect of partial or entire employees working from home is unknown and would be better evaluated in long term. This research aims at understanding the employee preference for the work environment and the effect of the work environment on the subjective wellbeing of employees. Employee preference is studied with the help of a primary survey focusing on various factors of remote working and working from office space.

KEYWORDS: Office, psychosociology, remote working, subjective wellbeing, Work from home

INTRODUCTION

The work culture has continuously been evolving since the Industrial revolution. Initially, the workstation started off as a row of desks moving on to cubicle culture with employers expecting more productivity from employees by reducing distractions. This changed to open spaces for better employment integration. The workspace culture started including flex spaces and hot desking as an attempt to space efficiency and reduction in real estate risk by reducing redundant office space. With the advent of new technology, data processing techniques various digital communication platforms work from home culture was introduced. Work from home proved very useful in 2008 after the Global Financial Crisis when the companies were struggling to reduce expenditure. Although the cost of real estate is higher for industries having more public/customer interaction like multiplexes, airlines, etc. Work from home has increased 173% since 2005 [1]

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

The objective of the research is to understand the effect of working from home on employee subjective wellbeing with the assumption that subjective wellbeing contributes to long term impact on employee productivity. The research talks about employee preference for work environment. The research focuses on the psychosocial effect of working from home on employees considering their gender, marital status, age, whether they have children, etc. The research is limited to office going population of sectors like IT-ITeS, BFSI, Global inhouse centres, etc. and does

not represent the opinion of employees of sectors that rely on onsite or in office work for production and revenue generation like manufacturing, experimental research, etc. The research is also limited to Indian market but can be used as a reference point for any market with respective alterations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Social Facilitation

The concept of social facilitation displays that dominant responses of an individual prevail in the presence of others. Social facilitation can be explained by two responses: the audience effect and co-action effect.

- Audience effect: The audience effect based on two experimental setups by Travis, 1925 and Pessin and Husband,1923 explains that the emission of dominant responses in an individual are prevalent in the presence of an audience [2]. [2], in his paper concludes that individuals who have to perform a task they are educated in, in front of an audience their dominant responses are correct ones and hence they are enhanced in the presence of audience. However, the learning abilities of an individual are impaired in the presence of an audience when compared to being alone. In this case, their dominant responses are the wrong ones, which remain to be so until the individual perfects the task. In the experiment carried out by Pessin which included learning of nonsense syllable and a finger maize it was found out the when the subjects were contacted later on after several days more subjects with the presence of the audience were able to recall the information when compared to the ones who performed the learning alone [2]. This shows that presence of an audience is beneficial for the individuals.

- Co-Action effect: In [2] paper on social facilitation he also discusses the works of different experimenters on social facilitation. The social facilitation is mostly observed in eating behaviours of animals where the animals in presence of other animals have a tendency to eat more. In an experiment carried out by Floyd Allport in 1920 [2], it can be noticed that the behaviour of his subjects is inclined towards the class of psychological process the 'emission of dominant response'. The subjects who in the process of learning, their learning is impaired by the presence of others while those who have learned the task are more efficient in the presence of others when compared to alone. The arousal levels in individuals working in presence of people are individual personality and situation based and cannot be put under generalization in the paper.

B. Social Loafing

Social Loafing is the tendency of an individual to put more effort when working alone and less effort when working in groups [3]. Social Loafing phenomenon is considered to be one of the reasons for decrease in productivity in a workplace setting. [3] in her paper on social loafing explains the effects of intrinsic and extrinsic involvement of employees on social loafing. The study establishes a relationship between task visibility as an inversely proportional function of social loafing. Individuals in a workplace setting feel they can economically rationalise by gaining from the work of others with minimum input. This however is prevalent when there is no or less intrinsic motivation. In case of presence intrinsic motivation amongst individuals, the relationship between task visibility (supervision) and social loafing becomes weaker. Hence intrinsic motivation is a moderator for the relationship between task visibility and social loafing. The intrinsic motivation can be indicated by the perception of employees as the task meaningfulness and effectiveness of their contribution. Employees find something unimportant if their contribution is not visible to their colleagues and superiors. In office work setting demanding physical presence intrinsic motivation is promoted by employee interest in the work, expectation of reward, satisfaction of contribution and avoidance of boredom. Many of these factors might not be prevalent in remote work settings.

C.   Social Cues and Intrinsic Motivation

- in their study on cues of working together on contributing to intrinsic motivation explain that individual's intrinsic motivation is enhanced when they have a feeling of working together on a particular task. The sense of working together is psychological. In this study, few subjects are working in a setting and informed that they might receive help from their colleagues thus inducing a sense of togetherness. The others are informed that they will receive help from the supervisor. The subjects are allotted a task that will lead towards a collective outcome. The subjects having a feeling of togetherness have more intrinsic motivation denoted by the factors that they are less likely to feel that motivation is due to responsibility towards others, feel less tired in case of a time limit, are more consistent in case of an insoluble puzzle.

D.   Work from Home and employee wellbeing

Subjective wellbeing is defined by Diener, Lucas and Oshi as a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life. Work from home has an effect on the subjective well-being of wage/salary workers. A study by [5] shows that in general, the Subjective well-being of employees is negatively affected by the practice of Working from home. The study [5] points out that Work from home setup affects different demographics differently. The stress levels are also related to the parental status and gender of the employees. Male parents experience higher stress levels when working from home on weekdays and a female parent feels more tired. The childless employee's Subjective well-being is not dramatically affected during Working from home on weekdays. However childless females when working from home on weekends feel more stressed [5].

- their study explains that although there is no direct relationship between Subjective Wellbeing of employees and their productivity, there are limited evidence that showcase employee productivity is due to subjective wellbeing on three counts. An individual with high Subjective wellbeing has better cognitive abilities and processes, better working attitude and better general health and psychology of employees [4]. A collective higher Subjective wellbeing of employees might prove beneficial for the organization.

E.   Ergonomics in office space

Ergonomics is the science of designing a product so that humans can use them effectively [7]. Ergonomics in an organization is designing the workstation in such a way that increases productivity and safety in work environment. India is an IT and ITeS intensive sector and hence the ergonomics in majority of Indian offices are related to computer tables and chairs. Different factors relating to humans are considered in ergonomics like height, proportions, weights, human vision, hearing, temperature preferences, etc. In the absence of proper ergonomics, the employees are exposed to the risks of stress, early fatigue thus leading to musculoskeletal disorders [7]. Proper ergonomics is related to wellbeing- mental and physical. According to the experimental study by [7], it is evident that lack of human wellbeing affects their productivity in an organization. Indian residential properties aren't built in a way to accommodate a workstation with proper ergonomics. Average house size in India is 504 sq. ft. [8] which is also an inhibition for inclusion of home offices. The organizations might have to incur and extra expenditure for making ergonomically efficient workspaces available to their employees.

F.   Work from home in India

The majority of factors affecting work from home India are the internet connectivity in India, availability of space in average household and status of data security and integrity in organizations dealing with IT, ITeS, BFSI, etc. The average household size in India is 4.8 [9]. The average size of houses in India is 504 sq. ft. [8]. The average fixed line downloading speed for

the world is 78 MBPS and India is 38 MBPS. This shows that the working space for a person available at home in a replicated setting of office is comparatively lesser and problems like acoustics, small house sizes, internet connection, etc. could arise for majority of population working from home.

The 6 factors discussed in the literature review indicate that the presence of people, proper ergonomic structure, privacy, social cues, etc. while working is beneficial for employee productivity. However, with increasing developments in technology, internet availability, use of digital communication platforms the tech savvy millennials and generation Z employees are more comfortable with the idea of remote working [1]. In order to understand the perception of Indian employees regarding remote working and work from office, a primary survey was conducted. However, different factors affect people differently. In order to address this, the primary survey responses were also studied for different genders of different age and marital status.

METHODOLOGY

Table 1: Age Group of Respondents

Age Group of Respondents	Age Group Participation
18-22	6.7%
23-39	79%
40-60	14%

The research methodology was questionnaire based primary survey conducted via google forms for working professionals. The research methodology was qualitative and descriptive. The questions of the survey were framed after studying various International property consultant reports like [1], [10], etc. The survey addressed factors like:

- effect of work from home on employee wellbeing based on employee gender, age, marital status and children
- Employee perspective on factors essential for an effective work environment
- Employee perception on their efficiency while working from home based on those factors
- Employee perception testing social facilitation and social loafing theories

V.   SAMPLE SET

The survey included 252 working professionals from sectors like IT-ITeS, BFSI, Manufacturing, Telecom, E-commerce, Construction, etc. The survey included 63% males, 35% females and 2% of the respondents preferred not to identify with a gender. 41% of the respondents were married whereas 39% were single bachelors, 15.9% were in a romantic relationship and 4% were in a live-in relationship. 64% of the married females and 66% of the married males had children.

Table 2: Work Experience of Respondents

Work Experience Categories	Respondents Belonging to the Category
0-2	19.4%
2-5	27.8%
5-10	31.7%
10-20	13.5%
More than 20	7.5%

Out of the respondents a majority of the chunk i.e., 65% of the respondents had up to two years of remote working experience whereas 8.3%, 10.7% and 1.6% respondents had 2-5 years, 5-10 years and 10-20 years remote working experience. 0.4% had more than 20 years of remote working experience whereas 14% of the respondents had no work from home experience. The respondents having no remote working experience were majorly from Manufacturing sector, construction sector and healthcare sector.

Along with analysis of total responses the sample set was also divided on basis of the assumption that the psychological, social and productivity-wise effects of work from home differ on the basis of combinations of genders, relationship status, presence of offspring, etc. Hence, the effect of remote working was observed separately on categories like single males, single females, married males, married females, married males with offspring, married females with offspring, etc. Consent was taken from all participants of the survey.
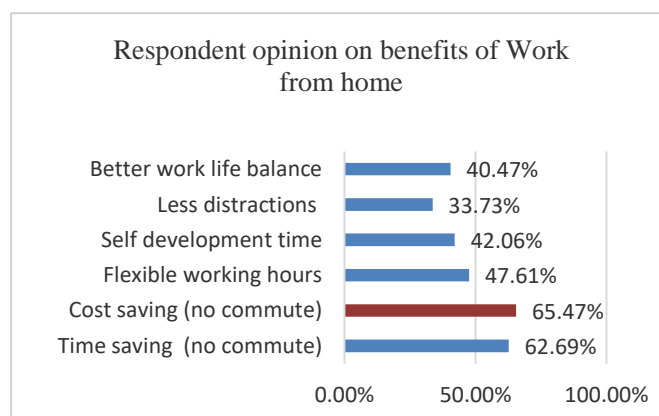
OBSERVATION

52% of the respondents wanted to opt for work from home again, 27% would 'Maybe' opt for work from home again and 21% of the respondents would never opt for work from home in future.
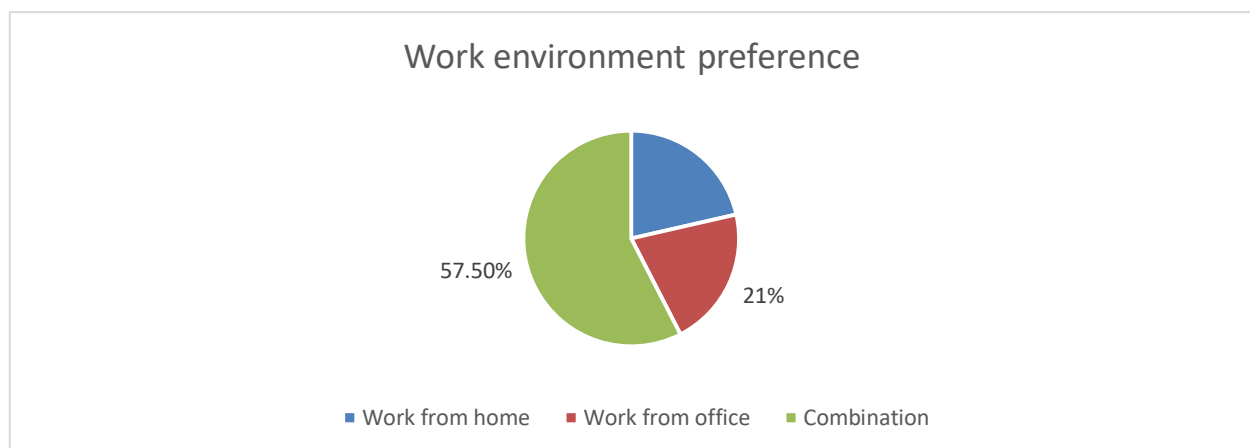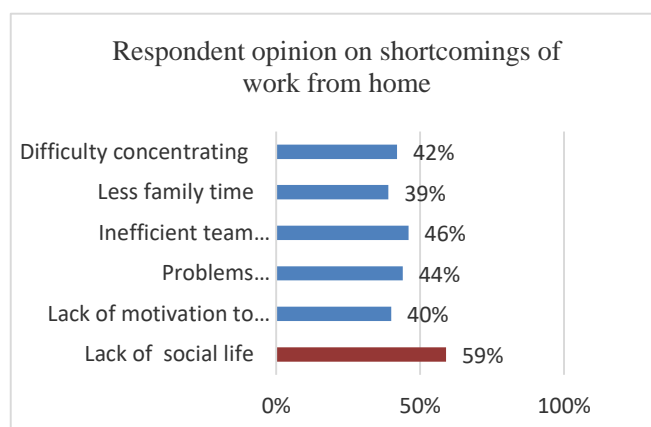

However, the major observation from the research was that when asked 'If given a choice what kind of work environment will the respondents choose?'

57.5% of respondents desired a combination of remote working and work from office, whereas 21% wanted to work from office alone and another 21% wanted to work from home alone. This analysis reflects the importance of office spaces and the need for real estate to look into the options aiding work from anywhere in the future. This shows that although the theories like social facilitation and social loafing explain that presence of colleagues in work environment help in working better and more effectively the employees these days would prefer a combination of work from home. The dynamic work environment choices reflect the adaptability of employees and importance of flex spaces in this age. Moving further, the study focuses on benefits of remote working over office environment working. When asked about benefits of work from home 62.7% of the respondents agreed to 'time saving due to no commute', 65.47% agreed to 'cost saving due to no commute', 47.61% agreed to 'flexible working hours', 42.06% agreed to 'More time for self-development', 33.73% agreed to 'less distractions', and 40.47% agreed to 'Better work-life balance' as benefits of Work from home over conventional office working.

Respondent opinion on benefits of Work from home

On enquiring about the shortcomings of Work from home 59% of the respondents agreed to 'Lack of office driven social life', 40% agreed to 'Lack of motivation to work', 44% agreed to 'problems communicating with the team', 46% agreed to 'Inefficient team building', 39 % agreed to 'less family time', and 42% agreed to 'difficulty concentrating in informal setting' as shortcomings of Work from home over conventional office space. The respondents felt that lack of office driven social life was the major shortcoming of working from home. Although majority of population feels that 'Less family time' isn't a disadvantage of work from home 76% of the females feel that Work from home contributes to 'Less Family time'.
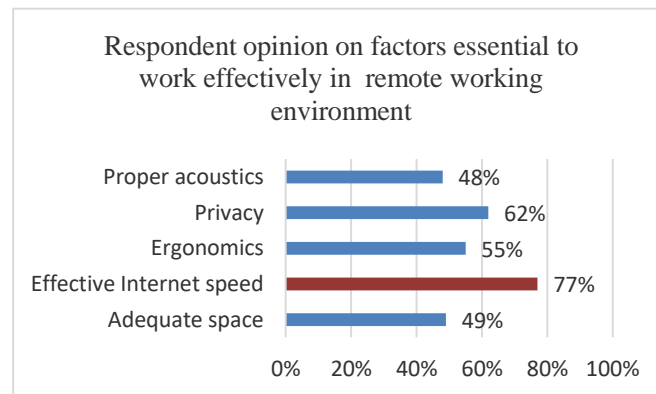
Saving of time and money due to no need of commuting to workplace because of the work from home setting was the most popular benefits of working from home amongst employees. Less distraction was the least popular response hinting that working from home isn't totally disturbance free. Even though the common consensus showed this result, gender-wise bifurcation of the survey question showed the following: Majority of males (single and married without children) perceived the listed factors as benefits of remote working followed by single females. The response of married females with and without children wasn't in favour of the above as benefits of remote working. Only 13% of married females and 38% of married females with children felt that remote working helps in betterment of work-life balance. The above statistics also indicate that married individual with children and married females without children weren't able to enjoy the benefits of remote working as compared to the rest of the demographic.

Respondent opinion on shortcomings of work from home

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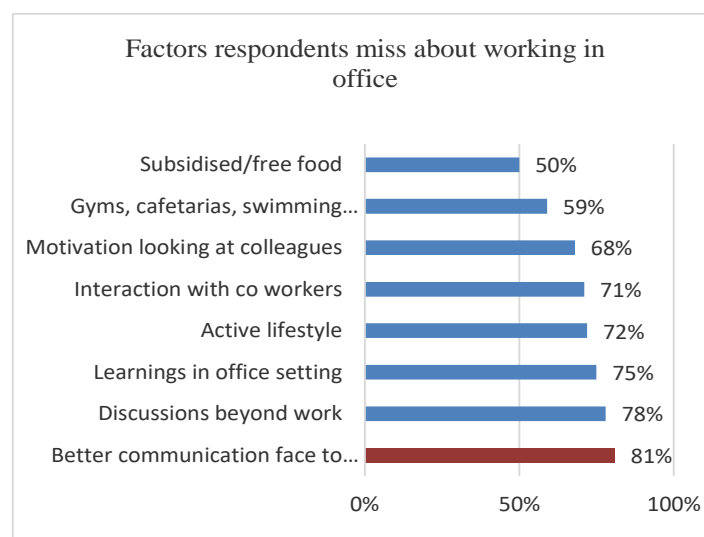
Amongst the factors highly essential for productive working from home majority vote of 77% was for Effective internet speed followed by 'privacy' at 62%, Ergonomics at 55%, Adequate space at 49% and proper acoustics at 48%. The

rest of the votes went for medium priority and a minimum of 10-20% of people said the above factors were not a priority. When observed the demographic categorically 83% of females with children feel the need of private environment while working. Whereas only 35% of married males with children have the need to a private environment to work effectively.

Respondent opinion on factors essential to work effectively in remote working environment

| Factor	Percentage
Proper acoustics	48%
Privacy	62%
Ergonomics	55%
Effective Internet speed	77%
Adequate space	49%

Most of the respondents i.e., 81% miss communication face to face to a moderate to high degree which supports the research by [11] stating that although it is easier to express in depth in online conversation it still shows an adverse effect on quality of life of people. Face to face interaction is essential for a better quality of life. The employees perceived lack of social life as the most disadvantageous factor while missing better communication face to face the most. This strengthens the fact that humans require social interaction for a better quality of life.

Work environment also affects the stress levels of employees. 40% respondents feel stressed 'sometimes' in work from home setting. A minimal of 3 % of the respondents 'always' feel stressed working from home. However, married females with children always feeling stressed is 4% more than the average respondents always feeling stressed. The stress levels of this particular demographic are negatively affected more than rest of the respondents. In the respondents feeling stressed sometimes the highest number is of single females that is 48%. 28% of married males with children never feel stressed which is the highest number. Also, 31% of married females feel stressed often which is twice to that of average. Different demographic encounter different levels of stress while working from home. Married females with children seem the most adversely affected from work from home culture.

Factors respondents miss about working in office

Factor	Percentage
Subsidised/free food	50%
Gyms, cafetarias, swimming…	59%
Motivation looking at colleagues	68%
Interaction with co workers	71%
Active lifestyle	72%
Learnings in office setting	75%
Discussions beyond work	78%
Better communication face to…	81%

The statistics thus mentioned indicate that women feel more stressed than men in Work from Home setting. However, based on the above statistical data, amongst women, married women are more prone to stress.

How often do respondents feel stressed in Work from home setting
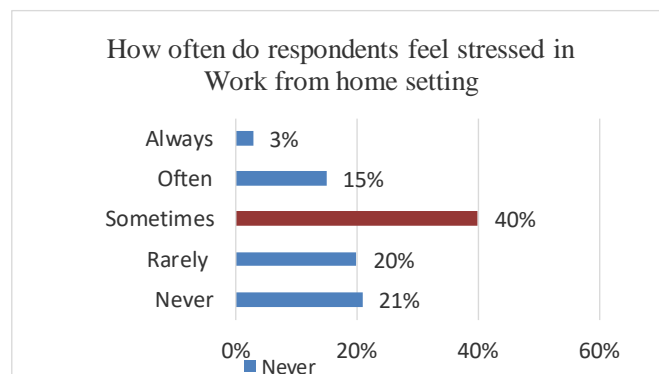
RESULTS

The primary survey points out that the most advantageous factor about working from home is time and cost saving due to no need to commute. More males were in agreement of given factors as benefits of remote working whereas not many females agreed to this. The respondents feel the most disadvantageous thing about working from home is lack of office driven social life and they miss face to face conversations the most. Respondents feel that the most important factor that could have a major effect on work from home experience is internet speed. Privacy is a factor that is more important to married females with children than males in work environment. This indicates that presence of children in work environment is distracting to their working mothers. 40% of respondents felt that working from home is difficult due to lack of motivation and 68% of respondents miss working around colleagues and find it motivational thus supporting the social facilitation theory. Stress levels in females in work from home setting are higher than that of males. Females with children are affected the most when compared to the rest of the demographic. Majority of the respondents want to work in a flexible way with the combination of remote working and working from office. Singles males and married males without children are more flexible towards work from home scenario and appear to enjoy it more than females and married males with children.

CONCLUSIONS

Employees miss social setting, face to face conversation and motivation from working around colleagues or with colleagues. Individuals are hoping for a work from anywhere culture which could provide a work system with a combination of office space working and work from home. For this to be successful there could also arise the need of workspaces with work from home solutions. This is creating a demand for flexible workspaces.

52% of the total employees preferred to work from home again if given a chance indicating that work from home setting is more comfortable for productivity. This fact can contradict the social facilitation theory but further study into this survey displayed that different genders with different marital statuses showed different levels of adaptability. Single male employees were the most adaptable and different work setting didn't drastically and adversely affect their subjective well-being. Single males and married males without children are comparatively flexible in remote working setting and find it more appealing as compared to the rest of the demographic. Female employee subjective well-being is negatively affected by remote working. However single females are more resilient while remote working and find it more conducive than other females. This could be helpful for companies while designing work from anywhere employee strategy in the future.

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